

FIT for the CHALLENGE

YMCA's use exercise and nutrition lessons to fight childhood obesity trends.

BY MATT ALDERTON

The YMCA of the Triangle Area in Raleigh, N.C., started the Youth Fitness Challenge to integrate physical activity into after-school programs.

Three years ago, the **Goldsboro (N.C.) Family YMCA** noticed an alarming trend in its community: Children, captivated by computers, video games and television, were living sedentary lives. Knowing that such lifestyles often lead to weight gain and chronic diseases, Senior Program Director Hal Warner and colleagues decided to take action. In 2002 they created the Change for Children program to entice local youth away from the television and onto the playground.

The program, run by Y health and fitness staff, along with a local physician and a registered dietician, serves 6- to 16-year-olds who

attend four one-hour sessions per week for 12 weeks. Parents must attend several classes with their children. Sessions include a weekly seminar on nutrition as well as activities such as kickball, basketball and street hockey.

"It's a huge commitment we're asking of them," Warner says. And in return, children see huge results. In its pilot run, Change for Children helped 13 children develop healthy habits. Staff took each child's weight and measurements at the start of the 12-week program and again at the end. Participants lost between two and 18 pounds each. "We haven't been below 20 or 25 kids in any session since," Warner says.

Your YMCA doesn't have to create a stand-alone program, however, to make an impact on the habits of children in your community. You can integrate exercise and nutrition into already existing programs without the need for extra funding, time or staff. All you need is a little bit of creativity and a solid commitment.

As Fun as Possible

Approximately 30.4 percent of adolescents ages 12 to 19 and 30.3 percent of children ages 6 to 11 are overweight, according to the American Obesity Association, a nonprofit organization dedicated to educating the public about what it calls the country's "obesity epidemic."

"The percentage of overweight children has more than doubled in the last 30 years," says Michael Spezzano, national health and fitness specialty consultant for YMCA of the USA. The reasons, he says, are many. "It's video games, it's television, it's computers." Other culprits, he says, are fast food; parents' perceptions about safety, which keep children indoors; poor civic planning, which fails to include adequate parks and sidewalks where children can play; and a shift away from physical education in schools.

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To overcome the epidemic, program coordinators are creatively integrating health and fitness elements into afterschool programs and day camps. Key to successful integration, they say, is fun. Warner says, "Look at it as an opportunity for young members to be kids. Help them discover what it's like to be a kid again, to play kickball and dodgeball and street hockey and basketball. Make it as fun as possible so they want to come back."

At the **Southwest Wake YMCA** in Apex, N.C., Tony Campione, director of youth programs, helped nine branches of the **YMCA of the Triangle Area** institute an initiative called the Youth Fitness Challenge into afterschool activities. "We really wanted to teach kids that exercise is just being active," Campione says. "We worked with our fitness directors across the association to develop the program. For us, it just meant getting kids active, teaching them that they can play, and that playing is exercise."

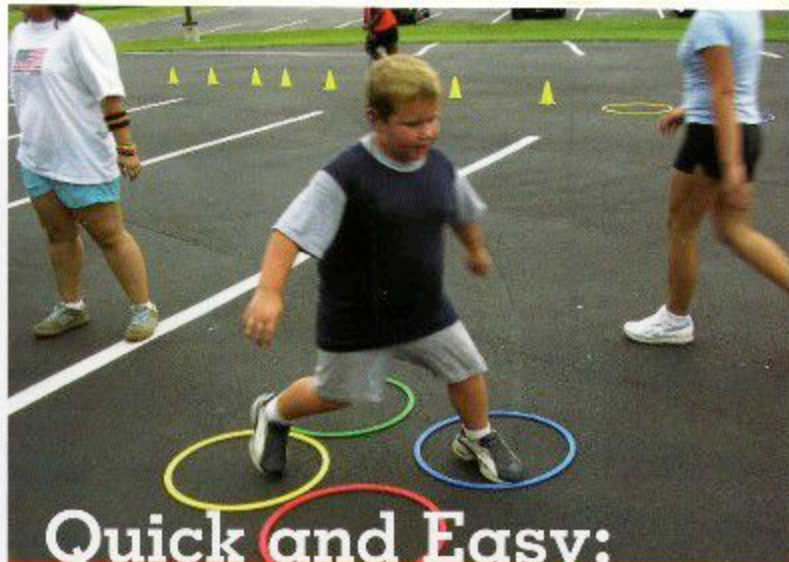
Designed for all afterschool program participants, the Youth Fitness Challenge runs from January through April in three-week segments that focus on nutrition, physical activity, family wellness, and mind and spirit. The Y introduces relevant afterschool activities, such as walking clubs and basketball games, in its program every week and sends a fitness challenge home with participants. Kids earn "active hours" when they exercise, which they can exchange for prizes such as water bottles, Frisbees and T-shirts. Last year, the association as a whole logged 28,000 active hours.

"We've received overwhelmingly positive feedback," Campione says. "Parents have said, 'For the first time, I truly have a dialogue for how to be active with my child.'"

Encourage Healthy Eating

Of course, exercise isn't the only piece of the healthy-child equation. Equally important, Spezzano says, is nutrition. "Most afterschool child care programs give kids a snack," he says. "You need to look at what you're serving kids. It's a way that Ys can have a significant impact."

The Goldsboro Y pays close attention to nutrition. Participants in its Change for Children program take a



Quick and Easy: 5 Ways to Incorporate Healthy Habits

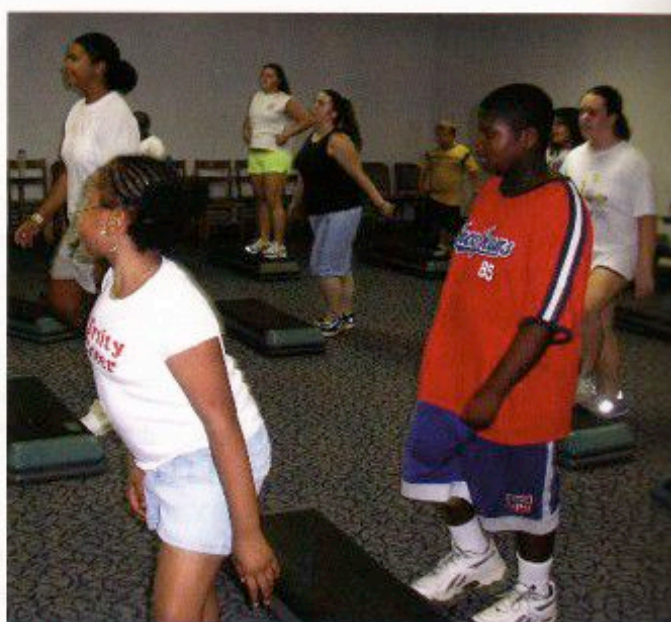
1. Make fitness fun and all-inclusive. "If you take a group of 30 kids and make them do step aerobics, they won't come back," says Hal Warner, senior program director for the **Goldsboro (N.C.) Family YMCA**. Popular games like dodgeball and kickball are great ways to make exercise fun for kids. However, they are also games of elimination. Modify the rules so everyone is able to participate for the full duration of the game.

2. Make nutrition a hands-on activity. Serve healthy snacks that kids can make themselves, such as "ants on a log," made with celery, peanut butter and raisins.

3. Encourage mentors. Your program can benefit kids of all ages. Recruit older participants as role models for younger ones. Inspire the younger program members to live up to their older counterparts.

4. Involve the entire family. Your program will have a difficult time succeeding if participants go home to a family that avoids exercise and indulges in junk food. Invite parents and other family members to participate in or to observe classes and activities. Give children homework assignments that involve their families, such as taking a walk after dinner.

5. Focus on health, not numbers. A healthy lifestyle is about making good choices. Focus on the overall health of participants, not on numbers such as weight or body mass index (BMI), which naturally fluctuate as children grow.



YMCAs can help young members develop healthy lifestyles that incorporate hearty exercise regimens and smart eating habits.

weekly nutrition class—several of which parents are required to attend—that is taught by a registered dietician.

“The parents are the ones who buy the food,” Warner says. “They’re the ones who make the decisions about what goes on the dinner table every night.”

There are two sides to a healthy lifestyle and maintaining a healthy weight, Spezzano says, energy in and energy out. “Kids today are consuming higher calories. At the same time, if you’re not burning enough calories through physical activity, it’s inevitable that you’re going to gain weight, no matter what your age.” Ys can help kids develop healthy lifestyles not only by teaching kids

to burn calories through physical activity, but also how to consume fewer of them.

Low Cost, High Value

Incorporating healthier components into YMCA programs doesn’t have to be expensive. The Youth Fitness Challenge, Campione says, costs the YMCA of the Triangle Area approximately \$10 per camper for the full length of the program. That’s about \$200 for the entire challenge, most of which goes toward purchasing prizes for participants. “It’s not as intimidating as you think,” he says. “Every afterschool Y program has the resources to make this happen easily.”

learn more

Visit [YMCAexchange](http://YMCAexchange.org) at www.ymcaexchange.org and explore the YMCA University section to find courses that teach you how to integrate health and fitness activities into your current program mix.

To help Ys integrate health and fitness into their existing programs, Y-USA recently launched the free "Youth Health and Fitness Training." The six-hour training, available on YMCAexchange (www.ymcaexchange.org) teaches YMCA youth staff how to effectively integrate exercise and nutrition into their programs.

Still, additional funding and resources can help you take your program to new heights. The Change for Children program, initially funded solely by the Goldsboro Family Y, received a \$450,000 grant from the North Carolina Health and Wellness Trust Fund to finance the program for the next three years.

"There are so many funding opportunities available," Spezzano says. "It's a bit easier today because there is such a spotlight on youth health."

In the absence of extra cash, partnerships with other local organizations can provide additional resources and opportunities. The Goldsboro Family YMCA runs the Change for Children program with the help of the Wayne County Health Department and Goldsboro Pediatrics. "The key to any funding is collaboration, collaboration, collaboration," Warner says.

Spezzano recommends approaching other community organizations and youth groups to collaborate on programming. "The goal is to keep kids healthy," he says. "Ys often can uncover resources they didn't realize were there before." ■

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